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ABSTRACT

This micromonograph, concerned with beginning reading readiness, is one of a series designed to answer for parents questions about their children's reading development. The development of the concept of reading readiness is briefly discussed, and four major factors involved in reading readiness are identified: mental factors, physical factors, emotional and social factors, and educational factors. It is recommended that parents and teachers be alert to the possibility of learning disability due to any of the above factors and that they should consult the specialist if such disability occurs. The importance of hearing, vision, speech, and motor control is emphasized, and their interrelationships and influence on reading readiness are pointed out. Other important factors for reading success mentioned are age, sex, interest, desire to read, and the child's general pattern of growth and development. The author also discusses how the teacher may assess a child's reading readiness and urges the parents to discuss frequently their child's progress with the teacher so they might understand the purpose of the type of instruction prescribed for their children. References and questions for discussion are included. (AW)

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What is reading readiness?

An ERIC/CRIER + IRA Micromonograph
by Norma Rogers

"Why isn't my child reading in a book? Other children are learning to read, but my child is not in a reading group. Why?" exclaimed the anxious mother of a first grader. When the teacher explained that she felt her child was not ready for formal reading instruction, this parent was completely baffled and filled with anxiety. She did not want her child to get behind the other children in reading and did not understand the idea of reading readiness.

Reading readiness has been a subject of much concern to parents and teachers for more than 40 years. This concern probably arose from the high rate of non-promotions in the elementary schools during the 'thirties and 'forties. Teachers often had children in class whom they felt were not ready to meet the demands of the next class. Consequently, they recommended that entrance be postponed until the children were better prepared. Researchers, investi-

gating why some children failed to develop the necessary reading competencies, concluded that these children were not prepared to profit from their initial reading experiences. Thus, they met anxiety, frustration, and failure very early in their school career.

Teachers were always aware of great differences in maturity and training among the kindergarten and first-grade children entering their classrooms. The question was, which *differences* in children really made the *difference* between reading success and reading failure.

Through research, educators sought to identify the complex abilities, skills, understandings, and attitudes which children need in order to ensure success in beginning reading and to prevent reading problems. They also worked to determine the minimum standards of performance in the areas which apparently influence success in beginning reading.

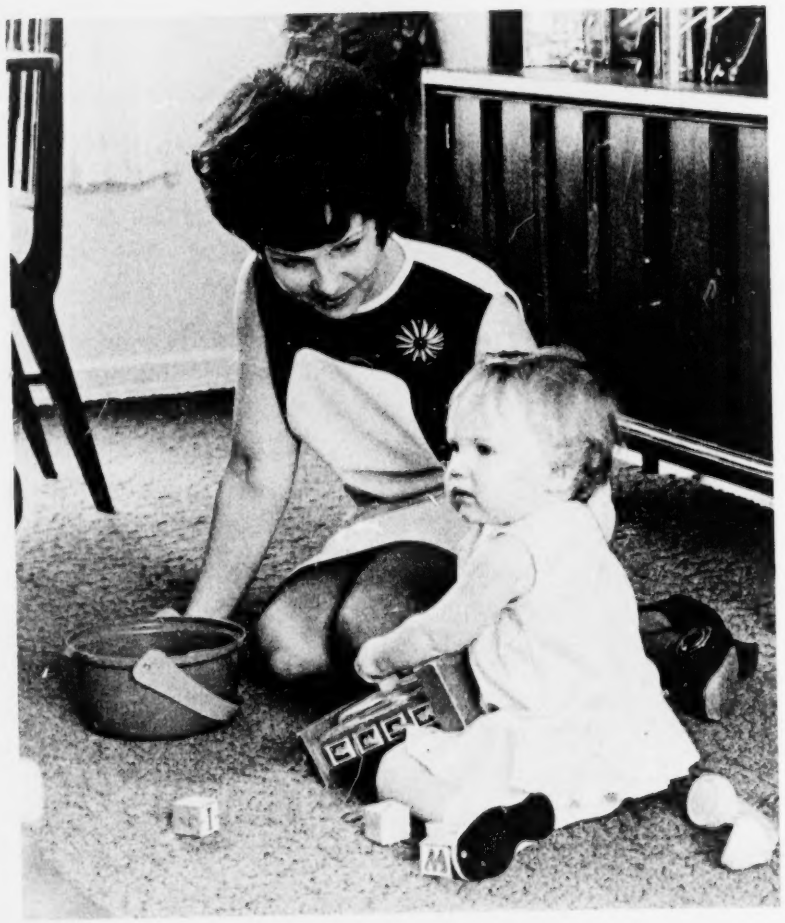
As teachers began to use more sophisticated evaluation techniques, it became more and more apparent that the decision as to when to begin formal reading instruction was of great importance. If a teacher could not predict reading success for a child based on his attitude, maturity, and prior education, she would extend the prereading period and work to strengthen the defined areas of weakness. This prereading stage was designated by the term *reading readiness*. Today reading readiness is also known as the first level of reading instruction. (In addition, this term can be used at any level of reading development to indicate a state of preparedness which should enable students to profit from further instruction at a higher level. However, it is most often emphasized during beginning reading instruction.)

It is now an established fact that one of the principal causes of poor progress in reading is premature formal instruction. The professionally prepared teacher has the responsibility of ascertaining when the optimum teaching time arrives for each child. This may very well be the most important decision that will ever be made concerning a child's educational progress, and it should be made as a result of a careful study of the child's readiness, not as a result of parental pressure.

When to begin is of great importance

Reading readiness has been defined in different ways by authorities in the field. However, the term will be used here to denote the general stage of developmental maturity and preparedness at which a child can learn to read easily and proficiently in a regular classroom setting when exposed to good teaching. It involves the "whole" child—his mental, emotional, social, and physical welfare as well as the specific skills directly related to the reading act.

The major factors involved in reading readiness are grouped under these headings: mental factors, emotional and social factors, physical factors, educational factors, and others. Remember, all of these factors are interrelated so that a strength in one area may compensate for a weakness in another, or a weakness in one area may cause another area to be weak. (For example, defective hearing is often a cause of poor speech and a low vocabulary. An emotionally disturbed child may be unable to concentrate, to remember, or to develop an interest in reading.)



Be aware of mental development

Learning to read is a complex mental process requiring mental associations, memory, and attention span. In the early 1930's, the results of intelligence studies of beginning readers indicated that a mental age (a measure of mental maturity) of six years and six months was necessary for success in beginning reading. More recent studies contradict this conclusion and suggest that the necessary mental age will vary with the materials, the teaching methods, the size of the class, the skill of the teacher, and the availability of special personnel. Where there is little individualization of instruction in the classroom, a mental age of six years and six months is certainly desirable. There is a marked relationship between mental age and ease-of-learning-to-read, indicating that there is a critical mental age level below which children cannot learn to read.

A child who has the mental ability to remember, to classify, to think, and to use his ideas to solve simple problems, to concentrate, to follow directions, to create a simple story, and to attend to a task should not be inhibited in reading because of mental factors. A preschool child has many experiences which he will use to develop concepts. The degree of his mental development influences his capacity to assimilate information, classify it, and store it in his memory for future use.

There are some children who appear to be normal in every way until they start to school. When class activities require them to perform mature tasks similar to the ones mentioned above, they may fall short of the teacher's expectations in one or several areas. In such a case, more instruction in those specific areas will be prescribed so that learning to read will not prove too difficult.

Emotional and social maturity are important too

Children of the same age vary greatly in their emotional and social maturity. They need self-confidence and self-esteem which comes as a result of many early success experiences and adult approval. When a child knows that he is loved, that he has a place of importance in the family, that he does things

well and when he has consistent parental discipline, he feels secure. On the other hand, children who feel unloved, unimportant and who have been subjected to constant nagging and ridicule will be fearful and unable to make a smooth adjustment to school life.

Children who have been encouraged to do simple tasks for themselves and who are somewhat independent of adults will develop feelings of adequacy and self-worth. If a child is insecure or immature socially or emotionally, his progress in reading will suffer accordingly.

Some symptoms of emotional problems which can be observed are nervousness, anxiety, fearfulness, extreme shyness, unhappiness, daydreaming, mistrust, and aggressiveness. Some observable signs of social immaturity are temper tantrums, selfishness, intolerance, crying, pouting, baby talk, overdependence on adults, and discomfort in small group situations. All children have some of these symptoms at times, but when several of these characteristics are noticed frequently, the problem should be discussed with a social worker, clinical psychologist, or psychiatrist.

Physical factors affect reading

Health. Healthy children are usually happy children. A child who is rested, well-nourished and who feels good will have the physical stamina to concentrate and work for prolonged periods of time. If a child comes to school tired from having watched a late television show the night before and/or hungry because he skipped breakfast, he will be irritable, inattentive, low in vitality, and unable to learn as he should. Furthermore, it is wise for parents to avoid illnesses which cause their children to be absent from school and thus to fall behind in their school work.

Vision. Vision is the path through which printed words go to the brain for interpretation. If a child's visual acuity (ability to see) is impaired, the image he sees will be blurred and perhaps difficult to remember or distinguish from other images. Poor visual acuity will prevent a child from developing the necessary visual discrimination skills; he will be unable to detect likenesses and differences in similar objects, shapes, letters, and words. A child who does not see well or who has had few experiences comparing and con-

Eyes and ears are basic tools

trasting objects or shapes at home will need much training at school to distinguish among letters and words.

Reading requires a high degree of eye control. A reader must be able to follow from left to right across a line of print, fusing the images of words seen by both eyes into one. A beginning reader must be able to focus his eyes at near point for extended periods of time. Farsighted children may tire easily and be unable to see the minute differences in letters or words.

Of course, in order to read well, one must have a good visual memory. Generally, if a child is free from neurological defects, has good visual acuity and discrimination, and is highly motivated, he will retain the visual images of words with minimum effort.

Remember, young children think everyone sees as they do and may not be aware that they do not see

well. Parents and teachers should be alert to symptoms of possible eye defects such as red watery eyes, tilting the head, squinting, sleepiness, inattentiveness, and sitting too close to the television. All children should have a visual examination by an eye specialist before beginning first grade.

Hearing. The ability to hear well (auditory acuity) increases a child's opportunities to gain new ideas, learn new words, and imitate the correct speech sounds. Even a slight hearing loss that goes undetected will be detrimental to a child's general educational progress. He will simply miss much that goes on around him. Auditory discrimination (the ability to hear and distinguish the difference in similar sounds and words such as /v/ and /th/ or *marry* and *merry*) is especially necessary for phonics instruction and spelling. Children need to be taught to listen and identify sounds which are quite different and progress to identifying sounds which are very similar. Often parents complain that their child does not hear them when they scold, call, or give instructions. This may or may not be a case of "convenient" deafness. A hearing test is recommended for all beginning school children. Some children hear well at the low frequencies but cannot hear well at the high frequencies or vice versa. Consequently, some voices may seem muffled, while others can be heard clearly. Don't forget, the speech sounds are in the high frequencies, and a significant hearing loss in this range causes real difficulty in auditory discrimination and memory of sounds.

Auditory memory (ability to remember what is heard) must be refined so that language patterns, oral instructions, and sequence of letter sounds will be retained.

A measure of hearing ability is most accurately determined by the use of an audiometer. However, when an audiometer is not available, other less accurate tests such as the watch test and the whisper test may be used. They can detect only a gross hearing loss, and they can do this only when classroom environmental conditions are ideal. Therefore, their usefulness is limited to a screening function, and their results should not be considered final.

Some signs of hearing difficulty are inattentiveness,

constant requests to repeat statements, misunderstanding simple directions, tilting the head, scowling with a strained forward posture, a blank expression, or turning the volume of the television or record player up unusually high.

Motor control. Frequently, disabled readers have poor motor coordination. This problem is often noticed in their walking, running, jumping, hopping, skipping, and other physical coordination activities. This difficulty may be caused by few opportunities to use the large muscles, fast spurts of growth, prolonged illness, immaturity, or slight brain damage.

Eye-hand coordination is essential for following a line of print, coloring, pasting, printing, tracing, and drawing. Consistent use of one hand (lateral dominance) is also necessary to develop the writing skills as well as to handle books, papers, pencils, and crayons with skill.

Speech. Good, mature speech patterns are important in learning to read. Faulty speech may cause a child to confuse the sounds which are associated with letters. He may say a word one way, but he may hear others pronounce it differently. This type of confusion hinders progress in auditory discrimination and memory as well as in word recognition and comprehension. Sometimes, too, a child with a speech impediment develops an emotional problem as a result of teasing, mimicing, or constant correction.

Parents who have a child with a speech difficulty are encouraged to discuss the problem with the school speech therapist, a social worker, or the family doctor so that the cause may be determined and appropriate corrective measures can be applied. Poor speech may be caused by a problem with the tongue or teeth, a hearing loss, baby talk at home, a foreign language spoken at home, an emotional disturbance, lack of experiential background, a lag in general maturity, or (occasionally) brain damage.

Attending. Ability to attend to a task for prolonged periods of time is essential to complete the many group and individual activities assigned to beginning readers. Children who have had short, interesting tasks to do at home are well ahead of those who have not. A teacher has approximately 25 children to keep

profitably occupied with learning activities and cannot be with all of them all of the time. So, a child needs some stick-to-it-ive-ness, perseverance, and patience to complete individual learning tasks. Distractibility is characteristic of young children or immature children.

Neurological disorders. Parents as well as teachers should be alert to the possibility of a learning disability of physical origin which would require special teaching techniques. Neurological disorders are sometimes congenital, but they can also result from a prolonged illness with extremely high fever, a birth injury, or a serious accident or fall resulting in head injuries.

Neurological disorders must not be equated with mental retardation. Children who have a brain dysfunction may be very intelligent but unable to learn effectively under normal classroom circumstances. They must be identified so that their school program can be modified accordingly. Similarly, children of average ability from secure homes may be highly distractible, inattentive, hyperactive, poor in motor coordination and memory, and/or have visual and auditory defects. If several of these symptoms are present, the child should be referred to a specialist for an examination.

A broad background of experiences provides the concepts through which children view their world. From birth, a child receives impressions and forms concepts about his environment. The home is the classroom and the parents are the teachers during the most important years of a child's life. A child learns more during the first five years of life than he ever will in any other period.

A child's senses are the windows through which he "sees." He develops broad concepts from experiences in seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, smelling, and tasting. He asks many questions. The correct answers help him to arrange, classify, and categorize information as well as to clear up misconceptions. Through games, trips, television, and conversation, he learns. The average child soaks up information like a sponge does water. He wants to know—about everything. Knowledge is satisfying to him and gives him a

feeling of importance. Parents should tell him, show him, and listen to him. This feedback is very important as it gives a child an opportunity to think and remember, to arrange his ideas in a logical order, and to use good speech and sentence structure.

Such use of language provides a framework for his new-found knowledge. It is also a stimulus to his development. Today's children are bombarded with language through conversation with peers and adults, television, radios, and records. As a result they develop a sophisticated vocabulary early in life. A child's language facility must be highly developed. This will be especially important during the later stages of reading growth.

Words are the tools with which children think. First, children learn the names for people, places, things, and activities. They learn words that describe how things look, sound, feel, smell, and taste. As understanding grows, oral language grows. If reading is to be meaningful, children need to know the meaning(s)

of many words, to understand ideas found in beginning reading texts, to express themselves well verbally, and to evaluate the ideas of others.

Obviously, this kind of educational development is enhanced by many experiences with books, groups of children, and schedules. Nursery schools, Sunday schools, libraries, and planned home activities provide excellent opportunities for children to learn. Fortunate is the child whose parents take advantage of these opportunities.

Consider three other things

Other factors which are important for reading success are age, sex, interest, desire to read, and a child's general pattern of growth and development.

Age. The average first grader comes to first grade when he is between five years and eight months and six years and nine months old (a possible age difference of 13 months). Chronological age is not always a reliable factor in predicting reading readiness, but it is a general indicator for an average child. It is true that in some European and American schools, average five-year-olds are taught to read, but the type of teaching and pace of instruction is highly individualized.

Sex. Girls usually mature earlier than boys and are more oriented to quiet activities which enhance readiness for reading. Naturally, they are often ready for reading at an earlier age than boys.

Interest and desire. The amount of effort a child exerts in learning to read will largely be determined by the extent of his interest and desire to learn to read. Reading is a difficult task requiring concentration and work. If a child does not really have a strong desire to learn, he will not put forth much effort.

Parents and teachers must help children develop a strong desire to learn to read through constant exposure to the wonderful stories, poems, jokes, pictures, and information contained in books.

Teachers look at the overall general growth and maturity of a child as well as isolated factors in deciding whether he is ready for reading. The absence

of some particular performance skill may be insignificant when the general pattern of development is good. This is especially true when special teaching techniques are employed during beginning reading to compensate for the defined weakness.

Just listening to comments such as the following on a typical registration day convince teachers of the differences in children. "You may have trouble understanding Stacy." "Steve can't sit still a minute." "Nancy has been reading for a year." "John is so big for his age." "Sue is so shy." "Ben has frequent attacks of asthma." "Jane's mother is very ill so she is living with me for now." The teacher of these children begins to make mental notes about Stacy's speech, Steve's hyperactivity, Nancy's precociousness, Sue's shyness, Ben's health, and Jane's distress over her mother's illness. It is easy to see that each child comes to school with his own unique bundle of experiences, anxieties, feelings, and attitudes. The orientation and adjustment to the school environment is usually the first task for the child at school.

Following this, teachers will develop specific lessons to improve visual and auditory perception and the vocabulary needed for reading. The left-to-right sequence will be emphasized, and fine motor skills will be practiced (cutting, pasting, coloring, writing, etc.). Most teachers will teach students to recognize and write the letters of the alphabet and to identify certain letter sounds. As the occasion arises, special words such as the color words, names of the numerals, days of the week, jobs assigned, and special holidays will be taught. The teacher will write short experience stories which the children dictate to her, and with practice they will begin to read and write them. She may label objects in the room and take note of those who are remembering words, asking about and writing words. She will read to her class daily and will give the children opportunities to express themselves orally. Many schools use readiness books which teach the skills directly related to reading and which give a proficiency test covering the skills taught in the book.

How does a teacher decide a child is ready?

First, remember that the teacher is professionally prepared and knows the psychology of learning and

the principles of child development. The judgment of a qualified teacher, based on constant observation and evaluation is as accurate a predictor of reading success as any available test. Most teachers keep anecdotal records on each child as well as checklists of readiness skills and rating scales. Nearly all schools now give reading readiness tests, and many give intelligence tests to beginning first graders. After bringing all of this information together and assessing each child's strengths and weaknesses, the teacher plans a program to fit his needs. This program may call for more instruction in specific readiness skills or the beginning of formal reading.

Parents are urged to discuss their child's progress with the teacher frequently so they may understand the purpose of the type of instruction prescribed for their child.

Let us remember that a child's reading readiness depends on his mental maturity, personal and social adjustment, development of physical skills, and educational opportunities. The factors are interrelated and influence a child's interest in reading as well as his desire to learn to read. Some phases of reading

readiness such as intelligence come with maturation, but many others are learned and should be taught at home and at school.

Parents interested in learning more about reading readiness will find the following bibliography helpful. Those also interested in suggestions for structuring reading readiness at home will find "Can I Help My Child Get Ready to Read?"–another article in this series–useful.

This ERIC/CRIER micro monograph is one of a series designed by the Clearinghouse on Reading to answer for parents questions about their child's reading development.

James L. Laffey, series editor **Billie Strunk**, publications editor
Bruce J. Tone, director of publications

Copies of this publication can be ordered from:

International Reading Association
Six Tyre Avenue
Newark, Delaware 19711

If you want more information . . .

Bond, Guy L. and Wagner, Eva Bond. *Teaching the Child to Read*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1966) 38-145.

Integrates the characteristics of a good reading program with current methods of teaching reading and identifies reading readiness factors and some methods of appraising them.

Durkin, Dolores. *Children Who Read Early*. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1966) 139 p.

Reports the results of two longitudinal studies of preschool readers and nonreaders and compares the type of home environment and intelligence of the two groups, answering from the data several pertinent questions. Especially interesting to parents.

Durkin, Dolores. "When Should Children Begin to Read?", *Innovation and Change in Reading Instruction*, Helen M. Robinson, Ed. Yearbook, National Society for the Study of Education, 67, Part II (1966) 30-71.

Reviews several important research studies completed between 1900 and 1965 and points out the changing trends toward the

earlier introduction of reading. Discusses the possibility that many preschoolers are ready to read, notes the traditional objections to preschool reading, and emphasizes the need to reevaluate current school practices.

Harris, Albert J. "Readiness for Reading," *How to Increase Reading Ability*, Chapter 2, 20-59. (New York: David McKay Company, 1970).

Examines the nature of readiness, indicating the factors involved as well as methods for evaluating strengths and weaknesses and for planning further development or correction.

Heilman, Arthur W. *Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading.* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1967) 1-164.

Presents an overview of the principles involved in the teaching of reading at all levels and describes in detail the factors assumed to be related to success in beginning reading. Also discusses various methods of assessing and developing reading readiness.

Ilg, Frances L. and Ames, Louise Bates. *School Readiness.* (Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965) 384 p.

Surveys the general characteristics of children at different age or developmental levels; describes the child as a unique individual; stresses the educational impact of the environment; and discusses in detail the measures used to determine the developmental levels. Especially interesting to parents.

Monroe, Marion. *Growing Into Reading.* (Chicago: Scott-Foresman and Company, Publishers, 1951) 262 p.

Clarifies the nature of reading readiness and the teaching problems involved; suggests experiences and teaching procedures that aid readiness; emphasizes the importance of effective cooperation between home and school; and discusses many personal experiences with preschool children. Especially interesting to parents.

Smith, Henry P. and Dechant, Emerald V. *Psychology in Teaching Reading.* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1961) 453 p.

Relates general learning theory to the principles of learning to read, with special emphasis on the perceptual nature of reading.

Spache, George D. and Spache, Evelyn B. *Reading in the Elementary School.* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969) 3-229.

Analyzes different ways of defining the reading process, the essential readiness skills and several approaches to the teaching of reading. Recommends readiness training procedures for the home and the school.

Some questions for thought and discussion

How did the concept of reading readiness develop?
What are some of the ways teachers assess a child's readiness for formal reading instruction?

Has your concept of "reading readiness" changed? In what way?

Discuss auditory acuity, auditory discrimination, and auditory memory. How are they different? How do they affect one's speech? Vocabulary? Phonics?

What is the difference in meaning of visual acuity, visual discrimination, and visual memory? How do they affect the way a child learns to read?

How are speech problems sometimes related to hearing problems?

Explain how intellectual growth is sometimes dependent on auditory and visual skills and emotional security?

Analyze some of the activities you have observed in a typical kindergarten class. Can you explain their purpose?

Discuss several reasons why a child who is six and one-half may not be ready to read.

What are some things we can do at home to promote reading readiness? Example: How can we promote development of strong desire to read, vocabulary, speech, large muscle control and small muscle control?